

## **FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** March 10, 2016

**Agenda Item:** Machler Conservation Easement (R4)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Endorsement

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 Min

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### **Background:**

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP) seeks Commission endorsement to pursue purchase of a Conservation Easement (CE) to protect wildlife habitat, ensure agricultural production, and provide public access to the Machler Property. The CE would encompass approximately 2,700 acres of unbroken sagebrush-grassland habitat north of Roy, MT in Fergus County (HD 417). The area is entirely within sage-grouse core area, and has 9 active sage-grouse leks within 4 miles. The Machler property is part of a larger landscape key to maintaining viable populations of sage grouse, as well as providing important sharp-tailed grouse, mule deer, pronghorn, and native non-game species habitat. The Machler property also adjoins 1,920 acres of DNRC lands currently inaccessible to the public.

The current landowner, Mark Machler, seeks to sell his property but wants to insure that it is conserved in perpetuity. He therefore approached MFWP about placing a CE on the ranch prior to selling to an interested neighbor. Both Mr. Machler and the interested buyer have been explained the terms and processes of MFWP CEs and are willing to work with the Department on developing this easement. Mr. Machler has demonstrated a favorable history in working with the Department on conservation projects, and owns other lands with a CE held by the department.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results:**

FWP has not sought any public comment at this time. Upon endorsement from the Commission, FWP would conduct appropriate analysis, public review processes, and negotiations.

### **Alternatives and Analysis:**

This CE would conserve agriculture and wildlife habitat, and provide public access to the property's lands and adjacent public lands. If FWP does not pursue this project, the status of these habitats would be susceptible to change under different ownership, negatively impacting high value wildlife habitat and associated public hunting opportunities.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale:**

The Department recommends endorsement by the Commission, which would allow FWP to proceed further with landowner negotiations and to conduct necessary analyses and public review processes. This project would conserve important sagebrush grassland habitats while also providing perpetual public hunting opportunities.

### **Proposed Motion:**

I move the Commission endorse the Machler Property Conservation Easement, allowing FWP to proceed with further work on this project.